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Reviews contents

*Paris Studio: Contemporary Writing by Fourteen Austr*alian *Authors*

review by Patrick West

*Paris Studio: Contemporary Writing by Fourteen Austr*alian *Authors, Who Lived, for a While, in Paris*
Edited by Victor Barker & Illustrated by Fred Cress
Sydney: Halstead Press, MMI
ISBN 1 875684 78 6
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> Why do writers who only read and write in English want to come and do it in Paris?... Why English language writers in Paris? I do not understand.

That (almost) makes two of us. More to the point, why Australians? There is something that grates about this collection of writings, and something important as well. Rarely has it been so vital for writers in this country to seek purchase in their understanding of Australia's cultural relationship to elsewhere. Surely I am not the only one experiencing that peculiar sense of vertigo (of which more later) which accompanies the feeling that a historical period, perhaps thought safely dead and buried, has now reappeared, only in more insidious guise. Toward what depths do we plunge in our intellectual and artistic isolationism and felt need to escape?

I wanted to like this sometimes irritating publication more than I was able to. It sets the scene for a dialogue with the problem of creating art and ideas in an increasingly conservative nation. What is missing is any substantial impulse towards giving the slip to the more conventional ways that we have acquired for thinking ourselves differently. The exceptions shine out all the more brilliantly for their rareness.

The questions at the head of this review appear in one of several contributions by the editor, Victor Barker (whose interventions, by the way, are a study in immodesty: an infiltration to the highest echelons of contributor status). The answer he provides is at least consistent with, if far more explicit than, the permutations of responses to the same problem contained on many other pages. "Unlike any Australian city, [Paris] is a grown-up city that treats writers like adults." And a little later on, this: "Let's be honest. We Australians live in suburbia. There's no longer need for lungpower to call the cattle home, for muscle to defend the homestead. It's time to learn a little softness, a little grace, a little cool." Paris is thereby constructed as a pedagogue. Only being *treated* like an adult, in this scenario, allows you to be one. It is this species of thinking I call the "first flight out"' syndrome. It would appear not to be a question, for instance, of finding the "Paris" in Brisbane or Sydney. Rather, finding the airport....What should adult writers (writers for adults) be doing today in Australia?

This section of *Paris Studio* is revealing also in other ways: "...a little softness, a little grace, a little cool." How easily description of the French capital slips into cliché. "Paris is not all Dior and Picasso," claims Barker at the end of the previous paragraph, one complete with the "scent of Pernod" and a redolent "zinc counter". One full, in other words, of stereotypes of

Paris pretty much along the lines of the references to Dior and Picasso. There is the intimation of an opposition here between Paris as imagined (in Australia), and Paris as actually lived by the contemporary (European) writer. It's too fragile though. In other words, something hasn't been given the slip.

I recall my strong feeling of a certain "sameness" in this publication. What sort of writing did my disappointment hold in reserve as an expectation? To begin with, I suggest that there was some failing in the editorial brief: either the one given to these fourteen writers directly, or the one more nebulously imagined as the guiding principle of the anthology. All the contributors have been resident in recent years in the Keesing Studio in Paris, the product of Nancy Keesing's legacy. (The section on the studio towards the front of the book is an interesting and worthwhile piece of historical housekeeping.) It is a pity that this shared habitation (inhabitation?) did not lead to a greater reflectiveness on personal experiences. Attempts at writing *differently*: I think this is what I really desired. A sort of "seeing ourselves as others see us," with all the attendant variety. What's here is all a bit too dutiful, almost writing by the numbers. There is an awful lot of geography and mapping, not always made interesting and fresh for the reader. And your eyes could be sunburnt by all the descriptions of light (which read too often as if produced only on cue). One more preventable continuity between the discrete pieces is the poor quality of the proofreading. Words are missing or misspelled, punctuation is out of place, or just plain wrong: it's like having sand thrown in your eyes while you're trying to concentrate. And an artist friend of mine thinks that the illustrations are all rather weak - superficial and caricatured.

At a deeper level, one could make the case that the sense of similarity connecting the contributors in terms of their personal preoccupations has a quite precise and significant cultural and textual point of reference. In the home of deconstruction, there is an ironic absence of any substantial degree of self-interrogation by these visitors to Paris. The meaning of being a writer is more often centralized than dispersed or re-examined by these particular writers.

Fortunately, there are exceptions. Bernard Cohen and Robyn Ferrell, from the viewpoints of the creative writer and the philosopher respectively, generate a complex and robust interrogation of what it might really mean to fly off to Paris, these days, to write. From one perspective, each piece is about writer's block, which stems on my reading from some sort of blockage in the Australian body of writers - about the place where Dior meets Derrida perhaps. We might call this a problem of mistaking the superficial for the substantial. The best critique that I feel capable of making of this publication is the sweeping one. Most of the writers who have contributed to *Paris Studio* seem to have fallen into the trap that Cohen and Ferrell (described in the mealy-mouthed lower-case usage of the Preface as a "philosophy professor") at least peer out of.

"Paris Does Not Exist." This is the burden of Ferrell's intelligent and exquisitely balanced essay. More precisely, the city is "a necessary non-existent... fictitious so that other things may be fact." What proves to be fact in Ferrell's case is the inability to pierce through the transcendent to the immanent with the pen. She simply can't put pen to paper in Paris. The visiting artist from Australia: more colonial than ever as a result of colonization by their self-made fictions of home and (particularly) of elsewhere, and most particularly of Europe and Paris. One might say that Ferrell finds only the evanescence of what she had hoped to find. Her essay is subtle; I'm concerned not to be unduly reductive. Also, I find myself wanting to present long extracts from this piece in a way I don't with most of the others. Accordingly,

> I never felt so alone as I did in Paris. It was the wreck of my dream of writing; it had all gone in a cloud of vanity. I was left in a cold morning of self-disgust, the emotional corollary of the argument of this piece. The idea of the studio at the Cité, of making application, and of getting it, had all been fired by the fantasy which - I am convinced - explains its existence at all. And yet it was a disabling fiction. It was an invitation to play a part. Looking at the whole thing again; the loss of myself as writer; the writer

> gone from Paris; the absence of Paris itself; the century having moved on - it all seems inevitable. *Paris, ce n'existe pas*.

Bits and bobs of the French language are often used in *Paris Studio* like adjectives. More effective is Ferrell's notion of what the vernacular did to her on the street: "And there was the language, which every day proved my foreignness - a feeling I passionately loved." At least twice elsewhere in her essay she talks of trespass, of which this is an example in the linguistic realm. If only there could have been more of such trespass and transgression throughout the anthology. A touch of Henry Miller really wouldn't have gone astray. I reach for my battered copy of *Tropic of Cancer*: "We are all alone here and we are dead... It is now the fall of my second year in Paris. I was sent here for a reason I have not yet been able to fathom..." *Touché*.

Bernard Cohen is no Henry Miller. Thank goodness for that. All the same, his contribution "Vertigo: A Paris Diary" is the best specifically literary equivalent of Ferrell's transgressive piece of writing. His notion of giddiness and falling is a well-wrought expression of the free-falling into a cultural and historical oubliette analyzed with equal deftness by the philosopher. Buy the book at least for this. Whether it be about the Arab Institute, the ferris wheel in the Tuileries, or the Eiffel Tower, Cohen writes to the point, albeit often an imagined smashing to smithereens down under an icon. And like Ferrell, at least he does manage to write through the difficulty of writing: "Is this my vertigo - a distorted writer's block? How ridiculous! Just get on with it! ...I am, after all, writing something: about my vertigo." For Ferrell, her residence in Paris, "just described as so hard in practice, now slips through my writing into yet more beautiful theory." There is an attempt here to recuperate the fantasy of Paris for the writer, as a useful fiction: a "beautiful theory". Should the writer go to Paris trying in all ways not to be a writer? Trying to be found by the fantasy (for fantasy and fiction surely there is) rather than trying to look for it? It is probably still important to go.

But perhaps other forms of vertigo have changed the relationship of Australia to Paris in ways not yet fully available to reflection. History has a way of overtaking all of us. Post September 11, what has not changed? Before Paris, Bernard Cohen was in New York: "At the top of the World Trade Centre, the windows stretch from floor to ceiling. It is possible to look almost straight down. It was thrilling more than frightening. I cannot be sure I would not have felt vertiginous had I known how to open the windows."

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The Artist is a Thief

review by Paul Dawson

The Artist is a Thief
Stephen Gray
Allen & Unwin 2001
ISBN 1-86508-533-2
282pp, $19.95

With a generous $20,000 prize and the backing of a national broadsheet, the Vogel award is the most prominent literary competition in Australia. In fact, it has the cultural status of a literary prize, alongside the Miles Franklin and various state premier's awards. The interest of these prizes lies in which industry heavyweight will receive a lifetime achievement award or which wild-card will be acknowledged by the literary establishment, so entering the canon of Australian literature. The interest of the Vogels lies in what new work will be introduced to our literary culture; although it seems odd that we have to wait a year before the novel appears, long after the initial publicity has faded. While the prize is for an unpublished manuscript, the winning entry tends to be a debut novel (the book under review is one exception). Furthermore, the competition is seen as an opportunity for young writers to bypass the slush pile and achieve instant recognition (although with an age limit of 35 years it would appear that writers age differently from other citizens).

As a result, more than most literary prizes, the Vogels can be seen as a barometer of cultural preoccupations, mapping shifts at the edges of literary culture: here is where the direction of young writing appears to be moving, or at least where judges and publishers want it to move. Andrew McGahan's *Praise* won in 1991, at a time when publishers were seeking the voice of contemporary youth, and it prefigured the onset of 'grunge' fiction. Helen Demidenko's *The Hand That Signed the Paper* won in 1993, contributing to public debates about the responsibility of writing history (think of Keith Windschuttle's 1994 *The Killing of History*). Furthermore, its success seemed almost to be a reaction to the ostensibly limited preoccupations of young writers. It could be argued that Richard King's lightweight *Kindling Does for Firewood* was a safe option in the wake of the Demidenko scandal in 1995. *Love and Vertigo* by Hsu-Ming Teo offered a rare exploration of Chinese-Australian identity a few years after Pauline Hanson tried to stir up alarm over swarms of Asians in our country.

Stephen Gray's *The Artist is a Thief*, winner of the 2000 Vogel award, is also a timely book, centred as it is around a forgery scandal involving an Aboriginal painter, Margaret Thatcher Gandarrwuy. Questions of authenticity and appropriation in relation to Aboriginal art have been forced upon public debate in recent years by Leon Carmen's 'memoir' under the name of Wanda Koolamatrie and Elizabeth Durack's assumption of the Aboriginal pseudonym, Eddie Burrup. These scandals are part of broader intellectual debates regarding reconciliation, the "'culture wars", and political correctness.

Rosemary van den Berg argued in 1998 that Durack was "stealing our culture and our intellectual property rights." These are precisely the aspects of Gray's book which are played up by its publisher, Allen & Unwin (the biographical note points out the author's academic

work in this area). *The Artist is a Thief* does not live up to its publicity, however, or the claim that it is "a philosophical detective novel with a difference." Certainly there are elements of detective fiction, for there is murder and intrigue and an exposition-laden denouement where the "mystery" behind deliberately obscured events is explained to us (a structural flaw of the genre itself). The phrase "with a difference" is the escape clause here, for the book would surely fail expectations if read as an example of the genre. Perhaps the skills of a detective are required to pick up the "philosophical" elements of the book, for I felt that it merely skirted around its apparent drawcard: the differences between Aboriginal and Western concepts of art, and their relationship to cultural identity.

The title itself alludes to this drawcard, suggesting that the book might address both the cultural clash and the potential theoretical overlap between Aboriginal notions of authenticity in art, and supposedly postmodern concepts of appropriation as an artistic practice. There are a few dismissive references to postmodernism in passages of dialogue, and in quotations from books and reviews which the main protagonist, Jean-Loup Wild, is reading, but not enough for this novel to provide any clever or insightful commentary on its underlying philosophy, and not enough for postmodernism to really figure in the plot of the novel. There are also a few references to the complexities of Aboriginal art, but despite the apparent centrality of forged Aboriginal paintings to the plot, the exploration of these ideas seem to be consigned to a few undeveloped thoughts of Jean-Loup in the epilogue.

The reason for this is not because Gray is incapable of or unwilling to really tackle these issues, but because the structure of the book causes them to be subsumed by other elements. As a financial investigator into the accounts at Mission Hole Art Centre in the Northern Territory, Jean-Loup finds that his investigation is inextricably linked with the cultural and political life of the Aboriginal community in which the centre is located. This casts him in the role of "detective", for the possible forgery which prompted his investigation is linked to a murder in the community. Dramatic conflict is thus produced by the clash between the bureaucracy of whitefella law and the "negotiated truth" of the Aboriginal community, not between differing views on the importance of art.

At a crucial moment late in the novel Jean-Loup remembers a conversation he had in Melbourne. His erstwhile lover, Linda, tells him: "There are no answers in religion anymore; why should we look for them in art? Postmodernists are only allowed to ask questions." This, in a literal sense, is Jean Loup's role in the book. As an outsider to the community, the bulk of his dialogue seems to be the posing of questions to other characters, rendering him little more than a vehicle of exposition at times. The main problem with this device is that Jean-Loup is not just an observer, his character is the focus of the book - and yet we never really get a sense of this character.

Jean-Loup lives in "new wave, millenial Melbourne: the freeway extensions, the new luxury apartment blocks, City Link." When he sees an advertisement for a financial manager at Mission Hole Aboriginal Community he is drawn to it as a means of liberation from his life. There is an embarrassing "sea-change" moment when he is inspired by the sound of children playing footy in the park and rips off his shoes and socks, running with abandon towards a tree, presumably to hug it. There is another reason for his attraction to Mission Hole, however. Seeing the ad "was the closest thing he had ever received to a message from the spirit world" because this is the place where his sister, Duchess, was born. Little is revealed of Duchess and this is one of the mysteries we must wait to be explained.

It is this set-up which encourages us to see the book as some sort of personal odyssey, a journey towards peace or enlightenment in outback Australia. And this is why Jean-Loup's blandness, his largely functional role in the unfolding of the plot, seems unable to carry the weight of the dramatic focus on his character (manifested in his anxiety over his relationship with Duchess and his father, his life and career in Melbourne, his love affair with an Aboriginal woman). His sense of frustration at the closed community, his cultural dislocation, are convincingly evoked, but the effects this has on him are not really explored. At the same

time, it is the focus on Jean-Loup himself which causes the other more interesting aspects of the book to remain underexplored.

At times I was reminded of Kenneth Cook's *Wake in Fright*, structured as it is around a city person plunged into a remote rural community, disoriented by all its roughness and insularity. And in the same way the memory of a woman haunts the protagonist of Cook's novel, so the memory of Duchess haunts Jean-Loup. Overall, the various strands of the book - the "mystery" plot revolving around an artistic scandal and a murder, the broader "philosophical" themes, and Jean-Loup's odyssey - are not sufficiently balanced or interwoven for any real substance to emerge from the book, giving it a somewhat sketchy quality.

I could also not help but wonder if this novel would not work better if written in the first person, rather than the third person limited. There is something overtly selective about the moments we are granted access to Jean-Loup's thoughts, as if they are merely to advance the plot rather than to develop his character. If the novel were in the first person, every word would be an indication of character and hence we would gain a greater sense of intimacy or understanding even though he flits through the book as a detached questioner. Towards the end of the novel Jean-Loup observes: "I feel as though I'm being shown the surface of a story, and as soon as I start to explore the next level I get shut out." This is the very story which is being narrated to the reader through Jean-Loup's point of view. As a result, it seems an accurate description of the reading experience. Very postmodern.

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Marketing Your Book: An Author's Guide

review by Tess Brady

Marketing Your Book: An Author's Guide
Alison Baverstock
A&C Black, London; distributed by Allen & Unwin
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150pp, $27.95

I know, in the way that I know that Australia is moving north at the rate that our toe nails grow, that only 2% of people who buy how-to books or self-help books act on the advice of the book. Both pieces of knowledge are curiously comforting.

I have no idea how I know these things, I just do. They are crowded in my head with all that other trivial knowledge that is never asked at the local Greens' trivia nights. It just isn't the kind of knowledge to win anything, not even the door prize. When I cut my toes nails I toss the clippings "down south" to somehow even the score, as if the land mass and the population of toe nail clippings are equal in some kind of density count.

How-to books try to instruct. It's something we as teachers of writing are familiar with - we instruct, but in what? The craft of writing? the act of writing? the writing life? the theory of writing? the process of writing? We occupy hours of classroom time, we strut our stuff at a variety of levels, in a variety of ways, opting for more of this, and less of that. We studiously avoid the old chestnut, "Can you ever teach someone to write?" and are often taken aback by it, as if it has been mentioned for the first time or, as if it belongs to a theory long since dead - something akin to reading fortunes in dead animals' entrails.

Instead, we get on with it. We strive to be challenging, entertaining, gentle, humorous, knowledgeable, reassuring, supportive, positive, or whatever. In all of it we want to be liked, we want to enjoy our work and gain some sense of satisfaction beyond the pay packet. For some the satisfaction comes from working with people, others are deeply interested in how to teach, for others there is the satisfaction in seeing a student succeed, and for others there is the fascination with the writing process. Few of us teach writing just for the money, although, if we are very honest with ourselves, on our worst days, the comfort of payday does help.

I say all this because I am interested here in the relationship between how-to books and teaching. Until recently I thought how-to books to be popular, in a lowbrow sort of way. I thought them too focussed on the commercial in a way that reminded me of used car yards. I saw them as trivialising the complexities of life and process, of dumbing it down too far into some kind of pop psychology that rendered even the smallest knowledge trivial. Like midday television and chat shows, they were devised and produced solely to entertain and to line the purses of the writers, publishers and booksellers along the way.

But life takes revenge on such smugness. Have you noticed?

Late one afternoon, several years ago, Dona Lee Brien from QUT and I got talking about real estate. Not everyone knows it's a reoccurring topic of ours. There were other women at the

table and they planted in our heads, with a kind of earthy determinism, the idea to write a book about real estate - for women, for them.

So we did.

The working process taught us both - we needed to find out about how-to books and about collaboration and about a range of other market driven necessities. We used Billy Wilder's pacing and sitting methods, we used angel wings, we used hideouts, we used our creative writing skills, we used a friend's printer, we used abseiling gear to install the phone line, we used our research skills, we used a crate of mangoes, we used our sense of humour, our knowledge of pace, our skills at dialogue, we used a lot of tact and yellow stick-ons, we drank a boat load of tea in a variety of cups and we never used Thai take-away, because we couldn't ever find any!

All of my smugness about how-to books left when I realised that they engage with their reader by challenging, entertaining, being gentle, humorous, knowledgeable, reassuring, supportive and positive. And perhaps most of all we were empowering the reader. But those are the same attributes I give to teaching? And like teaching, the book contains fun and moments of seriousness and reflection and reward. I was beginning to blur the lines between the two activities.

Like our teaching we had to turn our interest and knowledge about writing/real estate into a step-by-step guide, a series of lessons. We needed to find the right attitude for the teacher-the writer. We had to find our voice, our persona. We needed to be aware of our audience, of our pupils, and run at the speed that they wanted to run at rather than the one we preferred. We needed to be focussed and clear and precise and to not lead people up any garden path no matter what dream sat behind that front door. Importantly, we needed to be friendly - *preaching* and *patronising* and *telling* were out- it was all *show* and *discover* and *reveal.*

And to do this we needed evaluation and reflections. We needed opinions, and editing and criticism, just as we need in teaching in order to develop and perfect.

So it was with this awareness and new-found interest in how-to books that I decided to read and review Baverstock's title. This decision was completely self-serving as I was keen to pick up a few marketing tips.

But I was to be disappointed.

Baverstock's *Marketing Your Book* is the very worst kind of how-to book. Like all worlds, the how-to publishing world has a few tactics. One such tactic is to re-use old material, re-packaging it with a new title and a few new sections. There is on the face of it nothing wrong with doing this - after all only 2% of readers act on the information, and sales of any title keep publishers, writers and booksellers afloat. It's a kind of re-packaging that has become part of Western culture. The problems of re-packaging occur when the parts fail to homogenise or montage into a whole and are left as *parts* conflicting and working against each other such that not even a postmodern reading can find satisfaction.

Baverstock's title reads as if she has re-packaged existing material from other books and she has done so very badly and very quickly.

Less than half the book is given over to the needs of writers who want to assist their publishers in publicity campaigns, which would have been, if she had kept to it a focus, worth pursuing. This is punctuated in an almost random way with chapters on how to get published, the basics of writing, how to be a speaker and how to organise a book launch.

It's trying to be a kind of one-stop shop for writers - everything from getting the grammar right, to writing the book, to printing it, to publicity, book launches and reviews. As if it were so simple that it could fit into 150 pages - the exact number publishers use to render a product 'thick enough to be seen as a book'.

The problem is that the sections are written with different audiences in mind. The reader who wants and needs the basics of writing is not the reader with a published title wanting to improve their publicity campaign. The reader who is organising a book launch does not need to know about the ins and outs of publisher-writer-publicist relationships and the importance of the publicity information form which publishers ask their authors to fill out. Why? Because one is self publishing and the other is being published. The two are just not the same, and here I am not being snobbish. There is nothing wrong with self publishing, but the economic and publicity situation for the two are different in ways which are significant and in ways which render this book of little use to either.

No matter who the reader is they will find themselves flicking over large sections of the book - saying to themselves that it is of no relevance - and left searching for the few scraps that are.

Coupled with the problem of too wide a focus, it is an English publication and the long potentially-useful list of contacts for publicists, press agencies, courses on public speaking and the like are of little to no use in Australia.

Lastly, and this is perhaps its most serious fault - it does not discuss in any way the contemporary publishing situation of flooding the market with more and more titles so that in too many cases it becomes the writer, not the product, which is publicised. This is an odd omission because this book itself has been marketed on the basis of the writer's particular credentials - according to the blurb:

> The author worked in marketing in publishing before setting up her own marketing consultancy. As author of six books, she knows how, by working with the publisher, much greater results can be achieved.

A book dealing with this situation might have a section on working with photographers and developing a popular persona. It is probably better these days for a writer to talk about their local gym rather than their local bar even if they have never purchased a pair of gym shoes in their life and know more about *mixing* manhattans than *doing* crunchers.

Somewhere in the dark history of Baverstock's career is probably a genuinely fine book about marketing your work, but this is a trade make-over and it's as stiff as a bad plastic surgery job. In its efforts to be all things to all people it is nothing to nobody.

What has become obvious to me after reading *Marketing Your Own Book: An Author's Guide* is the need for such a title in Australia. One that keeps to the point, separates the author who is working with a publisher's needs from the self-published author, and provides an up-to-date list of contacts for both.

Tess Brady is co-editor of TEXT*, teaches writing at Deakin University and with Donna Lee Brien has written* The Girl's Guide to Real Estate *which will be published by Allen & Unwin later this year.*

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